

Historic Assam-Bengal Railway Workers' Strike (1921) : A Survey

Dipankar Banerjee

Perhaps the first sympathetic strike in our country of a tremendous magnitude took place in 1921 when the Workers of Assam-Bengal Railway resorted to an indefinite strike. The strike is very important from the historical point of view not only because it showed strong working class solidarity but also due to the fact that it attracted national attention and involved national political leaders. The strikers were clearly inspired by the non-cooperation movement that swept the country at that time. Possibly this was the first sympathetic strike ever organised in India. Unlike other labour movements of the period when the workers resorted to strike just to protect their own interest like demanding wage increase or reduced working hours etc., the workers of Assam-Bengal Railway resorted to strike just to express their sympathies towards the oppressed plantation workers at Chandpur in Assam. This was such an important strike that its importance could not be ignored by the Imperialist Government. An attempt has been made in this paper to throw some light on the subject.

Following an exodus from tea gardens due to insult, suffering and repression by the planters, the tea garden labourers were stationed at Chandpur and Laksam junctions enroute their homes in Central India, Bengal and Bihar (majority of these people were from Chargola and Longai Valley) where they had to face barbaric atrocities in the hands of the Gurkha regiment on 20 May 1921 in the very presence of railway officials. In protest against this Gurkha outrage on the stranded labourers the Railwaymen at Chandpur and Laksam junctions spontaneously struck work on May 24 which was joined by the local steamer workers on May 28. The strike also spread to the Barak and the Brahmaputra valleys and the railway workers of Habiganj, Lunding, Silchar and Gauhati joined the strike subsequently.¹

The railway workers had their own grievances too. In May they were unionised under the banner of "The Assam-Bengal Rail-

way Workers' Union" (formed on 5 May, 1921 under the Presidentship of J. M. Sengupta) ; they tried to ventilate their grievances through this union to the authorities against inadequate pay, distinction in leave rules, non-sanctioning of free passes, wrongful dismissals, non-allotment of quarters to the Indian employees etc.² But before these demands could be pursued vigorously with the authorities the Chandpur incident took place which added to the already embittered feeling of the staff and they went on strike. It is interesting to note that these railway workers stopped work not to put pressure on the management over their own issues (viz. inadequate pay, wrongful dismissals etc.) but to express their sympathies towards the oppressed tea garden coolies at Chandpur. They went on strike protesting the (a) "inhuman atrocities before the very eyes of the Railways employees on the tea garden coolie passengers at Chandpur station yard, resulting in many casualties with the knowledge and consent of railway authorities ; (b) placing of Gurkha soldiers who terrorised the station staff at the station ; (c) Assault on the Railway staff on duty at Chandpur ; and (d) Suppression of facts relating to the affairs of Chandpur station" etc.³ They also demanded repatriation of the stranded coolies at the planters' or the government's expenditure to their respective homes.

The Assam-Bengal Railways Union organised a series of meetings throughout Assam, Bengal and East Bengal and the entire area was surcharged with indignation and hatred towards the planters. *Hartal* was observed in protest against Gurkha outrage at Chandpur and in a number of places in East Bengal and Silchar and Sunamganj (then included in Assam).⁴ At Silchar *hartal* was observed for four days and was complete. Even unloading of railway wagons had to be suspended as the coolies participated in the strike. *The Statesman* reports : "The laskars and steamer zephyrs were urged to unload it owing to the general coolie strike but they refused and went on strike. Unloading is proceeding with the help of the convicts ; the steamer is under military police guard."⁵ The *hartal* was so successful that when Mr. Reid of the Assam Executive Council and Mr. Webster, the Commissioner, arrived Silchar for an 'on-the-spot' study of the situation by a special train driven by Anglo-Indian drivers, they had to walk from the railway station to their bungalows as "no gharries or taxis were available."⁶

Abdul Mazid, the Secretary of the Sareng Association of the East Bengal Steamer Service supported the strike and so he was arrested.⁷ In protest, the men on the steamer service also joined the strike on May 27.⁸ Even the ghat coolies stopped working

since the morning of May 28.⁹ So the two main arteries of communication between Bengal and Assam were totally paralysed.

Tarun Ram Phukan (a veteran Congress leader of Assam) tried his best to spread the strike in the Brahmaputra Valley section of the Assam-Bengal Railways.¹⁰ He was assisted in this matter by young Congressmen of the state like Nabin Chandra Bardoloi and others. They kept close contact with the nationalist leaders of Bengal like C. R. Das and J. M. Sengupta, who were closely associated with the strike in the Bengal counterpart. It was at the initiative of Bardoloi and Phukan a public meeting was held at Gauhati on 28 May in which the citizens of Gauhati expressed their grief and sorrow at the inhuman treatment meted out to the stranded coolies at Chandpur by the Gurkhas and condemned the apathetic attitude of the Government. By another resolution the Gauhatians while applauding the admirable solidarity, offered their congratulations to the striking workers of Assam-Bengal Railways.¹¹ The pleaders of Gauhati met on June 3 to discuss the issue and their Bar Association decided by a majority vote to suspend practice for three days in protest against the inhuman action of the authorities towards the coolies at Chandpur.¹²

The railway authorities, who had close contact with the Government tried its best to foil the strike. On June 7 the railway authorities issued an ultimatum to its employees to the effect that they must join by 15th, otherwise their posts would be filled up by the new recruits.¹³ The ultimatum further stipulated that even if the workers rejoin, they must have to apply for fresh service forfeiting all the privileges of past service.¹⁴

This infuriated the workers. Their colleagues in other railways also extended their support towards them. A meeting of about 6,000 workers of Bengal-Nagpur Railways Indian Labour Union (Kharagpur branch) was held on June 23 at Kharagpur; the meeting expressed whole-hearted support to the strike and resolved that no Indian employees of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway should apply for any situation in the Assam-Bengal Railway in response to the invitation made by the Agent of the Railways.¹⁵

The railway authorities started recruiting new hands replacing the old staff (Advertisement for fresh appointments appeared in the *Statesman* and the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* which stated that to avoid delay in appointments, applicants might appear personally).¹⁶ This produced serious repercussions. A call was given for social boycott of these new recruits. Markets were closed against them; they were subjected to harrassment and were looked down upon

wherever they went.¹⁷

As a result of the strike trade and commerce was hard hit, specially East Bengal transport trade was seriously affected. Acute dislocation of supply of the essential commodities took place and prices increased to a considerable extent. The *Statesman* reports, "Owing to Railway strike salt was selling at three annas per *seer* and ordinary kerosene oil at about Rs. 10/- per tin. The District Congress Committee, however, opened a stall for selling salt at six paise per *seer* and kerosene at 4 annas per bottle."¹⁸ Considering the inconvenience faced by the public, a delegation comprising of important figures of Indian Commerce, headed by Rai Janakinath Roy Bahadur met the Governor, Lord Ronardshay, urging him to intervene ; but their request was not entertained.¹⁹

The workers who were on strike were facing acute hardship. Bardoloi and Phukan tried their best to retain the tempo and the spirit of the workers. But due to the hardship being faced by the strikers and the general inconvenience being caused to the public the strike was gradually losing momentum at Gauhati and Lumding stations. Bardoloi and Phukan went to these places, organised meetings and mobilised public opinion in favour of the strike. It was mainly at their initiative that the workers of the railway's hill section, including the Lumding station staff, agreed to continue the strike. But the Gauhati station staff refused to continue the strike and resumed work.²⁰ A good number of striking workers left Lumding and came to Gauhati to persuade the workers of Gauhati station to resume the strike but their efforts failed. These workers from Lumding stayed at Gauhati for some days in the month of June and it became a real problem to arrange food and shelter for them. However, at the active initiative taken by Nabin Chandra Bardoloi the problem was solved. He personally arranged, inspite of lot of difficulties, food and shelter for these striking workers who camped at Gauhati.²¹

Though the non-cooperators of Indian National Congress backed this strike in general, a number of them, specially the moderates like C. F. Andrews etc. began to oppose the strike (previously Andrews supported the strike and took part in discussions with the management on this issue) on the ground that it was causing serious inconvenience to the public.²² The workers, however, declared that they were aware of the inconveniences caused to the public and that was why they wanted a peaceful settlement.²³ Another group of Congress workers like C. R. Das and J. M. Sengupta etc. viewed the strike from the nationalist point. C. R.

Das said, "These strikes are not labour strikes, they have sprung from the same spirit with which the battle of Swaraj is being fought all over the country, and it is part of the general non-cooperation movement."²⁴ Mahatma Gandhi, who visited Chittagong (in connection with organising non-cooperation movement in August, 1921) told the workers: "...until the Government has tendered a full apology in connection with it (the Chandpur incident) and refunded to the parties concerned the money paid for the repatriation of the coolies, the strikers are morally bound to refrain from rejoining service, no matter how great and tempting the inducement offering may be."²⁵ C. R. Das and J. M. Sengupta along with Tarun Ram Phukan, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi and Ashwini Kumar Dutta left no stone unturned to keep up the morale of the strikers and keep it going.

A section of the nationalist press took up the issue of the strike vis-a-vis the Chandpur incident for unmasking the real face of the planters. (Though the nationalist press supported the strike and advocated a quick solution of the deadlock they failed to give any constructive welfare approach for breaking the deadlock.) On the other hand, the imperialist press tried its best to give a distorted version of the strike and the Chandpur incident. "The strike was in reality no strike," wrote *The Statesman*, the mouth piece of the imperialist rulers, "for it has nothing to do with wages or conditions of work. It is merely a political *hartal* in which the poor wage earners are being victimised". "...the labourer has been taught his power and naturally he uses it."²⁷ The colonial imperialists also scented the presence of Bolshevism. "...Bolshevism is all round us. The creeping, insidious thing is here."²⁸

J. M. Sengupta, the Hon'y. Secretary of the Assam-Bengal Railway Union submitted a draft proposal for settlement to the management on June 15. The proposed terms were :

- (a) A promise by the Agent (of the Assam-Bengal Railways) that he would sympathetically consider all the grievances of the employees.
- (b) A promise by the Agent to enquire and punish people who had been guilty of assault on strikers during the strike.
- (c) No victimisation.
- (d) Recognition of the Union.
- (e) No break in service.
- (f) Pay for the strike period.
- (g) Terms should be settled between the representatives of the company and Mr. J. M. Sengupta, the President of the Union.²⁹

Though the Agent agreed to first three proposals, the rest were not considered and no settlement could be reached at.³⁰ On the contrary, the alien government took stern measures to foil the strike. Old hands were dismissed, new recruits were taken in. In his report to the Bengal Government on August 24, 1931, the Acting Agent of the Assam-Bengal Railway wrote : "The number that originally went on strike was approximately 8,000 of whom about 3,300 have resumed to date, leaving 4,700 still out. Against this, some 3,000 new appointments have been made, leaving 1,700 vacancies still existing."³¹

But ultimately the struggle failed : the strike collapsed. In fact, in the face of heavy odds under the British oppression and pressure, the strikers had to choose between the continuation of the strike and unconditional surrender to the authorities. On 8 September, after a heroic struggle for three and half months, the strike was withdrawn. The adamant attitude of the Government which led to dismissal of nearly sixty percent of the strikers and the resultant demoralisation that swept the striking workers, the unsympathetic attitude of a section of moderate Congressmen towards the strike, lack of experience of the leaders to conduct a labour strike of such magnitude, in which the employees were spread over a vast area, the lack of the leaders' foresight to visualise the organised strength of the employers who were backed by the Government - all these were responsible for the failure of the strike.

Though the strike failed, its importance cannot be ignored. It was the first sympathetic strike organised in the country when thousands of workers belonging to different undertakings struck work and nearly sixty per cent of them lost their jobs just for expression of their feelings of sympathy towards the cause of plantation labour and opposing the oppression of the British Government on them. The strike also exhibited the rising solidarity among the labour in the region which was hitherto absent. The strike also revealed the bond of unity among the exploited and the downtrodden section of the society with the intelligentsia against their common enemy - the British imperialism. Finally, it brought home to the moderate Congressmen that the Congress had to take up labour problems seriously because labour cannot be kept isolated : the fight for the workers' causes and the Swaraj was interlinked.

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